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THE BALLET OF THE NATIONS

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THE BALLET OF THE NATIONS

A PRESENT-DAY MORALITY

by VERNON LEE

with a PICTORIAL COMMENTARY
by MAXWELL ARMFIELD

*What is the Sorriest thing that enters Hell?
Not any of the Sins . . .*

D. G. ROSSETTI.

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le 4 Août 1915

THE BALLET OF THE NATIONS

FOR a quarter or so of a century, Death's celebrated Dances had gone rather out of fashion.

Then, with the end of the proverbially *bourgeois* Victorian age, there set in a revival of taste, and therefore of this higher form of tragic art, combining, as it does, the truest classical tradition with the romantic attractions of the best Middle Ages. In South Africa and the Far East, and then in the Near East quite recently, the well-known Ballet-Master Death had staged some of his vastest and most successful productions.

"It is time," said Satan, the Lessee of the World, to "re-open the Theatre of the West. The Politicians and Armament Shareholders have long got all the stage-property in readiness, and the Scene-Shifters of the Press are only waiting for the signal."

"Your orders shall have my very best attention," answered Ballet-Master Death, "for, to tell you the truth, my dear Lord Satan, this West, with its Doctors and Economists and Trade Unions, is fast losing the habit of those sublimer forms of Art of which Aristotle pithily remarks, that they purge the world of its inhabitants by terror and pity. I myself will answer for the Dancers, if you will see to getting an adequate orchestra; for, as you are aware, Death himself cannot set the Nations

dancing, still less keep up the dance, without the Music of the Passions."

"That shall be my business," said Satan, the World's immortal Impresario; "let us lose no time."

The first Instrumentalist whom they called upon was Self-Interest, who is usually engaged to play the ground-bass of Human Life. But he had joined a Trade Union. "I am busy," yawned Self-Interest, "come some other day"; and he turned upon his ear, and dreamed of reconstituting Society upon a broader basis.

"Self-Interest was always a dull dog; not a particle of divine fire in *him*," grumbled Death. "What was the good of wasting time on such a fellow?"

"May I remark that you Skeletons are apt to be a trifle testy?" answered Satan, quite unruffled in his delicate iron wings. "Don't you see that by knocking at Self-Interest's door, I have brought Fear, that over-retiring old slut, to her window? Hi! Widow Fear, it's only a couple of old friends inviting you to a little entertainment. Come down, my dear, and bring some of your ungraceful but amusing offspring."

So Fear, squalid beyond all other Passions, came down, hesitating just a little, because she had heard Self-Interest refuse the invitation. But she was speedily dragged along by her shabby, restless twins,

Suspicion and Panic ; and the family carried penny-whistles and fog-horns and a cracked storm-and-massacre bell, genuine mediæval but wrapped in yesterday's *Daily Mail* and *Globe*.

"Rather an unpresentable lot, though such first-rate performers," mused Satan ; "we must have something handsome to make up for them, for the Nations have grown dreadfully superfine of late, and some of the other indispensable members of the band aren't very attractive either. Deign to join our little amateur orchestra," he cried in a fine round voice, and rustling his arch-angelic wings ceremoniously, "dear my Lady Idealism and my young Prince Adventure." And the couple, bride and bridegroom, came out of their palace of cloud and sunbeams ; very magnificent they were, and of noblest bearing, if a little overdressed. Idealism carried a silver trumpet and Adventure a woodland horn. There came also Death's mother (or wife, for their family relations are best not inquired into) Sin, whom the gods call Disease ; nor was there any need of calling her. With her came her well-known crew, Rapine, Lust, Murder and Famine, fitted out with bull-roarers and rattles and other cannibalic instruments.

"Here comes Hatred with Self-Righteousness," said Satan, nodding in the direction of a pair who pretended not to be acquainted, but were

nevertheless hurrying together out of the Inn of Vanity, and trundling between them a huge double-bass and a small harmonium, upon which, once they had taken place, side by side, Self-Righteousness, most obligingly, gave Hatred his right pitch.

“That'll do to begin with,” cried Death, who was always in a hurry. “Heroism is sure to join as soon as we have well begun; and he can be plopped down anywhere. See! here come the Dancers! Just strike up a bit; Fear and you; Idealism; and you, Hatred, growl on the deep string; just a bar or two to make the Nations hurry up and get over that tiresome *mauvaise honte* of theirs.”

THE Nations had meanwhile assembled, each brilliant and tidy in its ballet dress, which was far better cut, and of handsomer stuff, of course, than its everyday broad-cloth or rags. And Idealism and Adventure, Hatred and Self-Righteousness, were already busy tuning, for unlike the rest of the orchestra they were sticklers for correctness, when Ballet-Master Death's preliminary instructions were cut short by the appearance of an unsuspected and very odd pair of additional musicians. For while the rest of the band were dressed, or in some cases undressed, in classical, mediæval, biblical or savage costumes, these two were habited in a manner uncompromisingly modern, the one like a

city clerk who should have joined the Red Cross, and the other, who was a lady, in the spectacles and smock most commonly seen in laboratories.

“Get out with you!” yelled Ballet-Master Death, jumping from his stool at the sight of the new-comers; and, turning to his orchestra, “Kick them out! Kick out the new-fangled intruders who want to spoil our fun! Knock them down! Trample on them! Don’t you see they are alien spies? Spies in the service of Life and Progress!”

“Hush, hush!” answered Satan, with an arch-angelic gesture which sent all the orchestra cowering to their places, and temporarily paralysed the skeleton arm of Death. “Which of us is master here, I wonder? Will you never learn manners, you bony old relic of the Stone Age, with your rabble of instruments fit for an ethnological museum?” Then, turning to the new-comers, “Please excuse his country manners, dear Madam Science and dear Councillor Organisation. You know the habits of Skeletons, their skulls are inevitably empty!”

“Pray don’t mention it, my Lord,” answered Science, who had a first-rate gramophone tucked under her arm, “*qui sait comprendre sait tout pardonner*, so it is part of my professional duty to find excuses for your Ballet-Master’s behaviour towards us.”

“It’s all as it should be,” added Organisation, who had begun un-

packing a very handy miniature pianola and its various rollers. "Of course Science and I *are* permanently in the service of Life and Progress. But that firm is working slack at present, so we feel at liberty to take a temporary engagement."

"Nothing could be more conducive to the success of our Ballet," answered Satan, pressing their hands affectionately but lightly between his claws, which Science took this opportunity of examining; "and I only hope our collaboration may become permanent. Of course Death," and he lowered his arch-angelic voice to the politest whisper, "is getting a bit old for his job and dreadfully prejudiced. Besides, I fear it can't be denied that you have done one or two things which have made ignorant people gossip in a manner calculated to rub him the wrong way. Come here, you peppery old Ballet-Master," and Satan playfully sent an electric stream through the Skeleton which sent him shivering and rattling like a brake of dry reeds, "come and shake hands with this illustrious lady and gentleman, who will keep up our Ballet with their wonderful mechanical instruments when the rest of our classic band have neither breath nor strings left. And now, as soon as our new friends are seated in the front place they deserve, please begin your instructions. And, by the way, you haven't yet given out the title of our new Ballet."

“THIS Ballet of ours,” began Death, after rapping three times on his desk, “is called the Ballet of the Nations. Nothing very new in the title, but one that always draws. As regards instructions, long experience has taught me that I can leave both my orchestra and my *corps de ballet*—the Nations at present have all got excellent heads—to their own inspiration, provided only they will keep their eyes constantly fixed on my bâton. The more they depart from the regulation steps, cutting capers according to circumstances and inventing terrifically new figures, the more they will find, odd as it may appear, that their vis-à-vis as well as their partners will respond ; and the more indissolubly interlocked will become the novel and majestic pattern of destruction which their gory but indefatigable limbs are weaving for the satisfaction of our enlightened Stage-Lessee, my Lord Satan, and the admiration of History. As to the music, all that is wanted is that the rythm be well marked, the discords plentiful but adequately relieved by allied harmonies and powerful national unisons ; and that our Orchestra of Human Passions should refresh itself with strong spirits as often as is compatible with not falling asleep. The scheme of the Ballet is very simple, and its variety arises out of the great number—I hope I may say the constantly increasing number—of Dancing Nations. The main *motif* is, of course—for we

are thoroughly up to date, although our dear Impresario does not give us credit for it—the main theme is that each Nation is repelling the aggression of its vis-à-vis, and at the same time defending its partner. There are two minor themes of outstanding Dancers flying to the rescue of the main groups: the two themes together giving rise to all manner of surprising inventions. It is, I need scarcely say, very conducive to a fine effect that all the Nations should keep a strictly innocent expression of countenance, while endeavouring to tear off as much of the costume and ornaments, and lop off as many as possible of the limbs of their vis-à-vis. At the end of the main action the Chief Dancers may be called upon to shift sides or take part in a general breakdown of a highly modern and anarchical style, something like the Paris *impromptu* after the *pas de deux* of 1870, only on a vast scale. And now! the first position, please!”

“One moment!” cried Satan; “I’m sorry to be always interrupting, but what about Heroism? He’s sure to join, and where shall we place him when he turns up?”

“Oh, just anywhere,” whispered Ballet-Master Death; “he is always the most obliging of my orchestra, although he usually comes in after we have begun. And not a bit difficult to please, like Idealism and even Adventure. *He* won’t mind sitting alongside that filthy slut Fear, or

surrounded by the cannibal music of the Companions of Sin. But here he comes!" For at that moment there entered Heroism, with limbs like a giant, blushes like a girl, and merry eyes like a child's.

"Welcome, Heroism, our Prince of Tenors," cried Satan, with sham cordiality, for there was no love lost between the new-comer and himself, although Heroism was sincerely attached to Death. "We were just saying, my dear young friend, that there is nothing you shrink from, and that you are the most modest and reliable of our orchestra. Why, I remember the French Revolution Ballet, when Heroism and Panic played not only a duet, but at the same instrument, four hands! That was Lessee Satan's finest Ballet hitherto, with the Marat theme in Paris and the Hoche theme on the frontier. But, with good-will, this new dance of our Ballet-Master Death may be still finer and as long."

Death smiled, for he loved Heroism.

"Come here, my boy," he said, "you have always been dutiful and loving to your old daddy Death, and cared for him more than for any other of the Immortals." So saying, the Skeleton Ballet-Master tapped the budding cheeks of Heroism, that star-like youth, with eyes which laughed but saw not, for even as his cousin Love, he is blind from the cradle. And Heroism, at the sound of Death's well-known voice, kissed

his bony fingers with rapture ; and, grasping the drum with which he accompanies his heavenly voice, sat down obedient between Fear and Hatred, unconscious of their foulness.

THE way the Ballet began was this : Among the Nations appointed by Satan to dance, for a few had to be kept to swell the audience, which would otherwise have consisted only of sundry sleepy Virtues and of the Centuries-to-Come, which are notoriously bodiless and difficult to please—among those Dancing Nations there was a very little one, far too small to have danced with the others, and particularly unwilling to dance at all, because it knew by experience that the dances of Ballet-Master Death oftenest took place upon its prostrate body. So it was told, as it always had been told, it need do nothing but stay quite quiet for the others to dance round. And as it stood there, in the middle of the Western Stage, two or three of the tallest and finest Dancers danced up in a silent step, smiling, wreathing their arms and blowing kisses, all of which is the ballet-language for “ Don't be afraid, we will protect you,” and danced away again wagging their finger at a particular one of their vis-à-vis, who was also curtsyng and smiling in the most engaging manner on the other side. During this prelude Idealism, Self-

Righteousness and a one-eyed hidden Fiddler called Statecraft, played a few conventional variations on the well-known diplomatic hymn to Peace, to which the Nations pirouetted unconcernedly about, although Fear, with Suspicion and Panic, were beginning to whistle and to thump on that mediæval tocsin-bell concealed in greasy newspapers.

And as the Smallest-of-all-the-Corps-de-Ballet stood quite alone in the middle of the Western Stage, that same tall and very well-trained Dancer sidled up to it with polite gestures of "by your leave," and, suddenly placing his colossal horny paws on the Tiny One's shoulders, prepared for leap-frog. But at a sign from Death's bâton, and with a hideous crash of all the instruments of Satan's orchestra, and a magnificent note from Heroism's clear voice, the poor Smallest-Dancer-of-All tripped up that Giant and made him reel. But the Giant instantly recovered his feet, although his eyes became bloodshot and his brain swam. And, flinging the poor Smallest-Dancer on the floor, he set to performing on its poor little body one of the most terrific *pas seuls* that Ballet-Master Death had ever invented, while the vis-à-vis Nations danced slowly up, till they all came to grips over that Smallest-of-all-the-Dancers, who lay prone on the ground, and continued so to lie, pounded out of all human shape into a dancing-mat for the others.

"This first figure of our Ballet," said the world's Impresario Satan, rising from his seat and bowing to the audience, that is to say, the Nations who wouldn't dance, and the sleepy Virtues and the Centuries-to-Come; "this first figure of our Ballet is called *The Defence of the Weak*. It will continue unremittingly at the Western End of the Stage, while the Eastern End is occupied by a not entirely symmetrical (for symmetry is apt to be *fade*) choreographic invention called the *Steam-Roller Movement*, which will end up in the Triumph of such small Nationalities (and I sincerely hope many will join!) as may have any limbs left to dance with."

DURING this first figure of the Ballet the scenery of that Western End of the Stage had undergone a slow change, and continued changing in a manner such that the Ages-to-Come, seated among the audience, admitted to one another these new scenic displays surpassed all others with which the courtesy of Satan had wiled away their *ennui*. For, whereas the Ballet had begun with the tender radiance of an August sunset above half-harvested fields, where the reaping machines hummed peacefully among the corn-stooks and the ploughs cut into the stubble, the progress of the performance had seen the deep summer starlit vault lit up by the flare of distant blazing farms, and its blue

solemnity rent by the fitful rocket-tracks of shells and the Roman-candles and Catherine-wheels of far-off explosions. Until, little by little, the heavens, painted such a peaceful blue, were blotted out by volumes of flamelit smoke and poisonous vapours, rising and sinking, coming forward and receding like a stifling fog, but ever growing denser and more blinding, and swaying obedient to Death's bâton no less than did the bleeding Nations of his Corps-de-Ballet. In and out of that lurid chasm they moved, by twos or threes, now lost to view in the billows of darkness, now issuing thence towards the Ballet-Master's desk; or suddenly revealed, clasped in terrific embrace, by the meteor-curve of a shell or the leaping flame of an exploding munition-magazine, while overhead fluttered and whirred great wings which showered down bomb-lightnings. Backwards and forwards moved the Dancers in that changing play of light and darkness, and undergoing uncertain and fearful changes of aspect.

Since, you should know, that Nations, contrary to the opinion of Politicians, are immortal. Just as the Gods of Valhalla could slash each other to ribbons after breakfast and resurrect for dinner, so every Nation can dance Death's Dance however much bled and maimed, dance upon stumps, or trail itself along, a living jelly of blood and trampled flesh, providing only it has its Head fairly unhurt. And that Head, which each

Nation calls its Government, but the other Nations call "France," or "Russia," or "Britain," or "Germany," or "Austria" for short, that Head of each Dancing Nation (except that of the Smallest-Dancer, who never ceased being prostrate on the ground) is very properly helmetted, and rarely gets so much as a scratch, so that it can continue to catch the Ballet-Master's eye, and order the Nation's body to put forth fresh limbs, and, even when that is impossible, keep its stump dancing ever new figures in obedience or disobedience to what are called the Rules of War. This being the case, Death kept up the dance regardless of the state of the Dancers, and also of the state of the Stage, which was such that, what between blood and entrails and heaps of devastated properties, it was barely possible to move even a few yards.

Yet dance they did, lopping each others' limbs and blinding one another with spirts of blood and pellets of human flesh. And as they appeared and disappeared in the moving wreaths of fiery smoke, they lost more and more of their original shape, becoming, in that fitful light, terrible uncertain forms, armless, legless, recognisable for human only by their irreproachable-looking heads which they carried stiff and high even while crawling and staggering along, lying in wait, and leaping and rearing and butting as do fighting animals; until they became, with those

decorous well-groomed faces, mere unspeakable hybrids between man and beast, they who had come on to the stage so erect and beautiful. For the Ballet of the Nations, when Satan gets it up regardless of expense, is an unsurpassed spectacle of transformations, such as must be witnessed to be believed in.

Thus on they danced their stranger and stranger antics. And, as they appeared by turns in that chaos of flame and darkness, each of those Dancing Nations kept invoking Satan, crying out to him, "Help me, my own dear Lord." But they called him by Another Name.

And Satan, that creative Connoisseur, rejoiced in his work and saw that it was very good.

"Dear Creatures," he murmured to himself, where he throned invisible above the audience of Neutral Peoples and Sleepy Virtues and Ages-to-Come, "how true it is that great artistic exhibitions, especially when they address themselves to the Group-Emotion, invariably bring home to the Nations that there is, after all, a Power transcending their ephemeral existence! Indeed that is one reason why I prefer the Ballet of the Nations to any of the other mystery-plays, like Earthquake and Pestilence, which Death puts on our stage from time to time. The music is not always very pretty, at once too

archaic and too ultra-modern for philistine taste, and the steps are a trifle monotonous. But it gives immense scope for moral beauty, and revives religious feeling in all its genuine primeval polytheism. It answers perfectly to what the Spaniards call an *Auto Sacramental*, a sacred drama having all the attractions of a bull-fight. I grant the Heads of the Nations are occasionally a bit hard-featured. But the Bodies of the Nations are always sound and virginal ; and their heart is always in the right place. And for true sublimity," purred Satan gently on his invisible throne, " give me, I always say, one of Death's dances performed by Nations each with its heart absolutely in the right place, and perfectly obedient to its traditional Head."

So the Ballet went on. But for this it was necessary to keep up the music of that orchestra of Passions and Habits which sat around the slippery and reeking stage : Widow Fear with her nimble children, Suspicion and Panic, playing on penny-whistles, foghorns and that mediæval tocsin-bell in its wrapper of newspapers ; Idealism and Adventure, that splendid pair, blowing their silver trumpet and woodland horn ; Hatred, who was always tuning afresh at the harmonium of Self-Righteousness ; Sin, whom the Gods call Disease, and her classic crew Rapine, Lust and Murder, with their cannibal band of bull-

roarers and rattles ; Science and Organisation seated a little apart, for none of the others liked their new-fangled looks, but whose gramophone and pianola went on unflaggingly when all the other musicians began showing signs of fatigue ; and only Heroism, a smile in his clear blind eyes, found ever fresh breath and ever more jubilant notes.

I HAVE just said that the rest of the band were beginning to flag ; either because the Passions are notoriously deficient in staying-power, or because, in the case of the less noble ones, they had fuddled themselves with the strong liquor of literature from Satan's tap-room, and were coming in all at random, Suspicion and Panic, notably, deafening the Heads of the Nations, and Fear, poor slut, being seized with *delirium tremens*. None of these things were noticed by the Dancers, but they danced a little less fiercely, and began mistaking their vis-à-vis for partners and vice versa, to the despair of the Ballet-Master, who wheeled from side to side at his desk, cracking his fleshless joints like castagnettes, and hitting the somnolent Human Motives of the orchestra tremendous whacks with his bâton of fire-hardened root-of-prejudice. But Satan began to fear lest the performance might end untimely, for, except the voice of Heroism and the mechanical instruments of Science

and Organisation, the sounds were getting feeble and intermittent, and the Nations were beginning to halt and stumble, and even to curtsy to each other as if the end might be at hand.

“This will never do,” said Satan to himself. “Why! we haven’t yet come to the figure of Famine and Insurrection!” So, beckoning with his arch-angelic claw to the followers of Sin, he whispered Rapine, Murder and Lust to fetch him two new players from among the Sleepy Virtues of the Audience.

Sleepy indeed they seemed, and some, like Wisdom, Equanimity and Temperance, let alone Truthfulness, had long since fallen into consoling dreams, after closing their eyes and bunging-up their ears against sights and sounds repugnant to their principles, but which they had not grit enough to interrupt. But among the Virtues two were not asleep, and sat motionless under the spell of hideous fascination; their eyes fixed, their hearing intent, with horror so great it almost turned to pleasure. These two were called Pity and Indignation, sister and brother of divinest breed; she, wan like waters under moonlight and as gentle, murmurous and lovely, and also, like such waters, dangerous in her innocence. The other, golden and vivid as flame, and like flame, tipped with terrible scarlet, purifying but devastating.

To them, who were fascinated with horror before that dance, there sprang, at Satan's bidding, Rapine, Murder and Lust, the crew of Death's Mother-Paramour Sin, whom the Gods call Disease. And straightway that noble pair of twins, Pity and Indignation, responded to the hideous summons. Hand in hand they leaped from among the sleeping Virtues, and flew, on rushing pinions, into the midst of Satan's orchestra. Fear and her brood fell back. Idealism and Adventure, by this time wellnigh spent with breathless blowing of their silver trumpet and hunting-horn, eagerly made room for them. Heroism, that blind, smiling young giant, recognised at once Pity's delicious healing breath and Indignation's fiery blast ; he shook himself, and with renewed vigour his godlike youthful voice sang out words which no one distinguished but all the world understood. And Sin, with her crew, fell down at the new-comers' feet and fawned upon them.

Even before either of that immortal pair had uttered a sound, the flagging Dancers, the bleeding Nations, weary of that stage slippery with blood and entrails, felt the wind of the wings of Pity and Indignation ; and, in its pure breath, suddenly revived.

The holy pair required no instruments. Pity merely sobbed, and her sobs were like the welling-up notes of many harps, drowning the soul

in tender madness. But Indignation hissed and roared like a burning granary when the sparks crackle as they fly into the ripe standing harvest, and the flames wave scores of feet high in the blast of their own making.

Death was overpowered with delight.

"Now nothing can stop the dancing," he cried ; "and this shall yet be the greatest triumph of Ballet-Master Death !" and, rapping on his desk, spoke as follows : "Ladies and Gentlemen, dear valiant Nations of my Corps-de-Ballet ! we will now proceed to the third and last figure ; the last because, as you know, it is made never to end ! For it is called *Revenge*."

"You might have trusted to me, dear Ballet-Master Death," purred Satan, the World's great Stage-Lessee, quite softly to himself. "Pity and Indignation can renew Death's dance when all the Nations have danced themselves to stumps, and the ordinary band, except perhaps Fear and her Children, can fiddle and blow no longer."

And thus the Ballet of the Nations is still a-dancing.

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